

MISSION LAKE PLAZA

COMBATING AN OPEN-AIR DRUG MARKET IN A SHOPPING COMPLEX

LAUDERHILL POLICE DEPARTMENT, FLORIDA, 1996

- THE PROBLEM:** Mission Lake Plaza, a shopping complex, was generating a disproportionate amount of calls for police service. Calls for service included disturbances, narcotics, gang activity, loitering, and public drinking. The plaza was covered with litter and poor lighting contributed to an open-air drug market. The drug activity spilled out into an adjacent park. School children walking through the plaza to and from school were solicited to purchase and sell drugs.
- ANALYSIS:** Interviews and meetings with community members and business owners revealed that the plaza had a longstanding reputation as an open-air drug market, which was attractive to dealers because of the high level of traffic, availability of alcohol and drug paraphernalia, and environmental conditions (poor lighting and upkeep). The plaza also served as a playground for truant schoolchildren.
- RESPONSE:** The police initiated buy-bust operations in and around the plaza and used confidential informants and video buys to find out the identity of the dealers. A trespass program was implemented enabling officers to have probable cause to arrest an individual for trespass after a warning. Truancies were also monitored more carefully and efforts were made to improve the appearance of the plaza.
- ASSESSMENT:** The assessment is still ongoing. However, the observations of the citizens and members of the city government have noted positive changes. Calls and letters have indicated that the plaza was a better place than it used to be. Calls for service have slightly decreased.
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SCANNING

In October of 1994, the newly formed Lauderhill Police Department assumed responsibility for the Central Neighborhood from the Broward Sheriff's Office.

Mission Lake Plaza was identified as the largest, most complex problem of the neighborhood. The plaza has twelve stores with eight in operation—

two convenience stores, a coin laundry, a hair salon, a barbershop, a day care center, two storefront churches, two food vendors, and a hair supply store. One of the convenience stores sells alcohol.

In the beginning, we responded to numerous calls for service the plaza. Calls for service included disturbances, narcotics, gang activity, loitering, and public drinking. Police officers were occasionally greeted with rocks and bottles upon arrival at the plaza.

The conditions of the plaza were unsightly and offensive. Beer cans, broken glass, and trash cluttered the grounds. The dumpsters were constantly overflowing with trash. Clear plastic baggies used to package drugs were found on the ground in the area. Poor lighting in some areas camouflaged drug dealers, and pay phones were used for drug transactions and an excuse to loiter. These elements contributed to an open-air drug market.

Community members, police, fire, and city employees identified the plaza as an open-air drug market. Mission Lake plaza is located in very close proximity to City Hall, City Hall Park, and the police and fire departments. It is also close to Royal Palm Elementary School and the Lauderhill Boys and Girls Club. Because of these circumstances, the plaza created problems for a wide range of people.

The plaza was determined to be the nucleus of the problems in the Central Neighborhood. It was a long-standing open-air drug market situated in the middle of a predominantly African American community.

The drug activity spilled over into the park, which is less than 30 feet away, and into the adjacent apartment complexes.

During the school year, between 400 and 500 school children walked through and past the plaza on their way to and from school. These children were subjected to this environment on a daily basis. On some occasions juvenile drug dealers solicited other children to be look-outs or sell drugs for them. Drug sales took place in the presence of the children and near their schools.

The offenders were identified as adult and juveniles, primarily African-American males. The buyers consist of both whites and African-Americans. The drugs of choice are marijuana and crack cocaine, mainly sold in \$10 or \$20 amounts.

ANALYSIS

The Lauderhill Police Department received information from the Broward Sheriffs Office months before the inception of the department about the severity of the problems at Mission Lake Plaza. We also had data showing that the Sheriffs Office responded to Mission Lake Plaza over 2,300 times from 1992 to 1994 for calls, which varied in nature. The Sheriffs Office Selective Enforcement Team made over 300 narcotic arrests in Mission Lake Plaza during the time they serviced the City of Lauderhill.

When the Lauderhill Police Department started, officers were assigned beats within the central neighborhood. Officer Dan Mathis chose the challenge of Mission Lake Plaza as his beat assignment. Officer Mathis went into the community and met with residents and business owners to find out their concerns.

Door-to-door interviews and randomly asked questions were discussed to determine the problems. A group of concerned community members were brought together to form a crime watch group. This group consisted of residents and business owners from the Mission Lake Plaza area. The group met twice a month at the police department to brainstorm and discuss issues surrounding the plaza.

In the beginning stages of these meetings, the owner of the plaza refused to attend the meetings. The owners of the businesses within the plaza expressed their disappointment with the owner of the plaza for a lack of concern for the perception and conditions at the plaza.

The following areas were identified:

Open-Air Drug Market

Mission Lake Plaza had a long-standing reputation as an open-air drug market. Drug buyers knew the plaza as an information center and a source to either purchase or be directed to purchase, marijuana or crack cocaine. The plaza was saturated with dealers from one end to the other. When the police arrived in the plaza, they observed the dealers walk into one of the stores, then purchase an item or hide their drugs.

| Statistical Summary Calls for Service to Mission Lake Plaza | |
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| December 1994 to January 1995 | 540 |
| March 1995 to April 1995 | 248 |
| May 1996 to June 1996 | 390 |
| By November 1995, 30% of the calls to MLP were drug related. | |

The presence of the drug dealers led to additional problems in the plaza. Dealers would loiter in front of the stores pretending to use the payphones, or appear to be waiting for someone inside one of the stores.

When police arrived on scene, they observed the dealers run over to the payphone so that they appeared to be on the phone. This activity started at 7:00 am, continuing throughout the night into the early morning.

This location was attractive to dealers because of the combination of environmental conditions, storefronts, corner location, and high level of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Drug dealers were also spread out in all directions from the plaza into the community.

Within a block in each direction, drugs could be purchased. The drug dealers were mainly African American juveniles and adults. The buyers consisted of mainly whites. The African-Americans that purchased drugs were usually local citizens. Road patrol officers obtained from the results of a reverse sting operation, and from observations this information.

Sale of Alcohol and Drug Paraphernalia

One of the convenience stores in the plaza directly contributed to the open-air drug market and the deterioration of the community. The store sold the small clear plastic baggies used to package and distribute drugs.

Store representatives claimed that the baggies were used for coin and stamp collecting. Another store representative stated that the baggies were sold to dealers to make up for the loss resulting from shoplifters. They also sold

copper pot scrubbers used to insulate crack cocaine smoking devices.

Alcohol and tobacco products were sold to minors. Juveniles purchased single cigars to use them to smoke marijuana. (The inner leafs are removed from the cigar and replaced with marijuana.) The store served as a "one-stop shop" for local drug dealers. The combination of supply availability and customers made the plaza an excellent place to loiter. Drug dealers could drink alcohol, smoke marijuana, and wait for the next customer in one location.

Trespass After Warning

The availability of paraphernalia, alcohol, and customers made it very difficult to keep dealers away from the plaza once they had been issued a trespass warning by an officer. When the dealers saw the police coming they would flee on foot if they knew they had been issued a trespass warning for the plaza. The plaza is accessible from many directions, creating escape routes. Another alternative for them was to claim that they were patronizing one of the stores.

Gang Activity

Some of the dealers have been identified as members of the "Deepside Posse." "Deepside" is the street name for Central Lauderhill. Gang members have marked Mission Lake Plaza as part of their territory by spray-painting "DSP" on parts of the property. Some of the members have been identified by tattoos and clothing. The gang consisted of juvenile and adult members.

Truant Juveniles

Mission Lake Plaza was a magnet for truant juveniles. During the day juveniles loitered in the plaza. Some were lured into being lookouts for drug dealers, while others became involved in gang activity. In the mornings and afternoons, other kids were subjected to seeing these kids loiter instead of going to school. This enticed them to want to skip school as well.

According to the Broward County Juvenile Intake Facility, the City of Lauderhill led Broward County with the most truant juveniles

in the county. The Lauderhill Police Department was second in Broward County among agencies picking up the most truants. Most of them were picked up at Mission Lake Plaza.

Poor Lighting, Maintenance and Upkeep

The conditions of the area were unsightly. Beer cans, bottles, broken glass, clear baggies, and trash were scattered along the grounds, and dumpsters were overflowing. Poor lighting in some areas camouflaged drug dealers and suspicious people. Business owners complained that poor lighting in the plaza was partially due to the plaza owner's refusal to replace broken lighting.

We concluded from the analysis that the environment in and around the plaza had an adverse effect on the school children in the area and those that attended the Boys & Girls Club across the street. This was a very dangerous environment for school aged children.

RESPONSE

Our initial response was an attempt to organize the community by developing a community crime watch program, which would initially be kicked off by a rally. Meetings were held and Officer Dan Mathis introduced the Mission Lake Project to the community.

The purpose of the meetings was to organize a crime watch team composed of motivated volunteers. The team members would be placed in strategic locations throughout the area to observe violations in the plaza area. The team would report violations either by CB radio or cellular phones to the directed patrols, which were assigned only to the Mission Plaza and its surroundings. Flyers were distributed throughout the community to gain interest in the crime watch program.

This approach was not successful due to the lack of support from the community. Some residents could not participate due to family obligations or other personal reasons.

For example, single mothers could not leave their children unsupervised. The elderly could

not physically leave their homes. Residents also expressed a lack of confidence in the new police department and its philosophy of problem-oriented policing. Residents mainly felt the problems at Mission Plaza could only be dealt with by the police and could not be solved by community efforts.

The Lauderhill Police Department was offered an apartment, to be used as a neighborhood satellite office, by an apartment complex adjacent to the plaza. A rally and "March Against Drugs and Crime" was used to kick off the grand opening of the satellite office.

There was limited participation by community members because many were afraid to be seen supporting the police department. As we continued implementation of the project, community support continued to decline. The community was adamant on seeing presence from the police department to eliminate the problems.

At this point we re-assessed the problems and the difficulties we were experiencing. The problems and possible solutions were outlined. Short-term and long-term goals and objectives were introduced.

Narcotic Activity

Road patrol officers initiated narcotics enforcement. Officers coordinated buy-bust operations in and around the plaza. Confidential informants and video buys were used by the Central Neighborhood Task Force to find out the identity of the dealers.

The information from these operations was given to road patrol officers to assist with finding and arresting dealers. This effort was intended to communicate to the dealers around the plaza that police officers were monitoring their activities closely.

Field Interview Cards and Photos

We received many dispatched calls in reference to dealers loitering in the plaza. Store merchants requested that some of the individuals be removed from the property. Road patrol officers

experienced difficulties issuing trespass warnings due to the fact that there are several stores with individual owners.

To address this situation a trespass program was implemented. Each storeowner, and the owner of the plaza submitted a letter authorizing the Lauderhill Police Department to bar loiterers from the property. A trespass/field interview form was developed that created duplicate copies.

When a trespass warning was issued in front of a particular store, the officer provided the store with a copy of the warning. This provided the store with documentation that could be shown to the responding officer. This then gave the responding officer probable cause to arrest an individual for trespass after warning.

In addition to the trespass program, signs were erected throughout the plaza warning of the consequences. The trespass form served as a field interview card as well. When this form is completed in the field, the officer takes a photo of the individual and attaches it to the card. These photos were organized in a photo album. The photo album helped with identification of suspects and assisted victims of crimes.

Juvenile Delinquency

We identified that one of the contributing factors to the problem at the plaza was juvenile delinquency. School children loiter in the plaza during school hours until late afternoon. The Lauderhill Police Department's Truancy Enforcement Team apprehended the second highest number of truants in Broward County.

Lauderhill Middle School had the highest number of truant children in the county. Most of these truants frequented Mission Lake Plaza. The Truancy Team worked closely with the school resource officer to identify potential truants by monitoring the absentee names. These names were put on a list along with the names of suspended students. The Truancy Team was provided with this list to identify truants.

Unsightly Appearance

Mission Lake Plaza has twelve stores with eight in operation. The appearance of the plaza was unsightly and offensive. Beer cans, broken glass, and trash was scattered over the grounds.

The dumpsters were constantly overflowing, and in some areas the odor of urine could be smelled. Small clear plastic baggies used to package drugs are frequently observed on the ground. Poor lighting in some areas camouflaged drug dealers and suspicious people. The pay phones were used for drug transactions and an excuse to loiter.

Short- Term Goals (implemented within six months)

- Narcotics enforcement
- Trespass program
- Enforcement of code violation through Code Enforcement
- Division Mapping through creative sentencing, restricting presence in the area of the plaza as a condition of probation
- Field interviews and photos

Long -Term Goals (within twelve months)

- Reduce or eliminate drug sales and use
- Improve the appearance and perception
- Establish recreational programs for the youth
- Establish the park as a safe place for family interaction
- Form a self-sufficient crime watch team

The Central Neighborhood implemented strict enforcement efforts at the plaza. No loitering and trespassing signs were erected in and around the plaza. Violators were arrested, and issued a trespass warning. The dealers responded by

watching the police department to learn what officers were working and how many. Dealers also dialed 911 to learn the response routes and the response times.

The next phase of the response included the creation and implementation of The Central Neighborhood Task Force. The Task Force was a uniquely designed problem solving team consisting of police officers, business owners, code enforcement, probation and parole, and other agencies. The police officers involved possessed special areas of expertise.

Dan Mathis, who had expertise in problem-oriented policing and street narcotics enforcement, supervised the Task Force. Officer C. J. Fifer specialized in crime prevention through environmental design, bike patrol, and weapons tactics; and Officer John Pulitano in crime prevention through environmental design and narcotics enforcement. This unique team made up the law enforcement component of the Task Force.

The Task Force was created to bring minds together to attack problems in the Central Neighborhood. The goals of the Task Force were to drastically improve Mission Lake Plaza and the appearance, reputation, and disposition of the entire Central Neighborhood.

One of the key partnerships in the formation the Task Force was between the police department and the community development code enforcement department. A solid working relationship between the departments allowed for successful joint operations. The community development department coordinated future plans for the central neighborhood with the police department.

We realized how each department had some involvement in the growth of the neighborhood. Brainstorming sessions and constant communication contributed to a solid three-way partnership.

Code enforcement was key in implementing crime prevention through environmental design in the plaza by citing code violations in the plaza. Code enforcement conducted routine

inspections of adjacent complexes for minimum housing conditions to make certain that complexes were up to city standards.

The Task Force did not limit its attention to Mission Lake Plaza. The activity in the plaza affected adjacent locations, including City Hall Park, Don Carlos Apartment, and The Windermere Condominiums.

As part of the area revitalization, these adjacent complexes were a part of the plans for changes. Most of the focus was centered on the park. Sometimes the park was a second choice for dealers and loiterers after they were directed away the plaza. Officer CJ Fifer used his expertise in crime prevention through environmental design to re-evaluate and redesign the park to attract legitimate users.

Some of the specific proposals suggested highlighting the portion the park that is closest to Mission Lake Plaza by adding bright colorful tot lots, and other amenities designed for family interaction. The intention of these upgrades and changes is to make the park the centerpiece of the neighborhood, attracting families and children. Illegitimate users will not want to engage in criminal activity if they feel they are being watched. More interaction in the park creates an atmosphere of natural surveillance.

| Central Neighborhood Task Force Statistical Summary Dec 95- Mar 96 | |
|---|----|
| Narcotic Arrests | 66 |
| Other Arrests | 70 |
| Search Warrants | 5 |

During this phase of the project, several obstacles limited productivity. The community still did not have faith in the police department and its philosophy. The community felt that arrests would solve all of the problems, and they wanted constant police presence.

The Task Force consisted of only three officers. These officers did not have full access to resources such as a drug unit, canine, SWAT, or other specialized units. The Task Force had to employ problem-solving techniques within their available resources.

The Task Force utilized CPTED, enhanced sentencing, and street level enforcement to gain control of Mission Lake Plaza. Mission Lake Plaza is located within 1000 ft. of a school, and within 200 ft. of a public park.

Narcotic offenses committed in this zone resulted in a minimum mandatory three-year sentence set by Florida State Statute. Lighting upgrades, barricades, and code violation enforcement changed the environment, making the plaza uncomfortable for dealers. The rear of the plaza was known for “drive thru” service. A barricade made of cement stops and palm trees eliminated vehicular access to this area. The elimination of this space practically terminated drug sales at this location by cutting off the buyers.

After the beginning stages of change, the Task Force attempted to re-establish a working relationship with the plaza owner. The owner routinely complained about lack of financial stability being the reason for not making upgrades. After weeks of failed attempts, the owner was sent a drug activity notification letter. This letter defined her property as a center of drug activity calling for her attention. The letter also notified the owner that if no action or cooperation were shown, it would result in a filing to the Broward County Nuisance Abatement Board.

The Nuisance Abatement Board is made up of seven local residents and officials that are appointed to the board. The board has jurisdiction over any property that is the site of drug, prostitution, or gang activity on more than two occasions within a six month time period. The board may bring a complaint, seeking permanent injunction on any declared nuisance. The maximum penalty that can be imposed by the board is a one-year closure of the property after it has been declared a nuisance.

Officer Mathis filed a sworn complaint on Mission Lake Plaza to the Nuisance Abatement Board. The complaint stated that the plaza was the site of drug sales and gang activity. The owner contested the hearing process. The owner

felt that the plaza was a police problem, not her problem. The Nuisance Abatement Board agreed with the police department.

The complaint prompted media and community attention in positive and negative forms. The newspapers indicated to the public that the Lauderhill Police Department was targeting the owner of the plaza so that the city could purchase the property for a cheap price and raze it. Statements were made saying the police were “picking on” the owner because she was Vietnamese.

The television coverage focused on the problem presented, and not peripheral issues. As a result of the picture painted by the newspapers, the police department was made to look cruel and insensitive to some community members. This took detracted from the purpose and aim of the Nuisance Abatement complaint.

The newspapers persuaded some community members, causing them to go against the efforts of the police department. Some even demonstrated in support of the plaza and its owner. But not all of the media coverage of this project was sympathetic to the owner.

At the Nuisance Abatement hearing, the board was not swayed by the media generated opposition. The board focused on the facts of the presentation, and they did not allow deviation from the rules and regulations of the hearing.

The Board considered the following facts:

- The plaza had a long- standing reputation as a place to buy drugs
- The plaza jeopardized the safety of children in the immediate area
- The number of arrests resulting from narcotics enforcement
- The overall uncooperative disposition of the owner
- The refusal to correct code violations

The board solicited the recommendation of the police department for changes to the plaza. The recommendations presented were what the police department determined to be the most important to change the appearance, perception, and reputation of the plaza.

The Police Department recommended the following:

- To be completed within 10 days from the hearing
 - Prohibit the sale of all drug paraphernalia (plastic baggies, rolling papers, and pot scrubbers) Limit the hours of operation from 7:00am to 11:00pm
 - Remove all payphones
 - Comply with all outstanding code violations
 - Hire a 24hr armed security guard detail
 - Develop a new tenant lease agreement for tenants (to be approved by the police department)

- To be completed 3 months from the hearing date
 - Install an iron gate in the open breezeway
 - Relocate all dumpsters to the rear of the plaza
 - Replace light poles and bulbs with 100 watt high pressure sodium lights
 - Replace all exterior lighting with vandal-proof fixtures
 - Failure to comply or complete will result in a filing for a permanent injunction

On or before the date specified above, the owner was ordered to contact Officer Dan Mathis for inspection of the property. Officer Mathis would report his findings to the board. The Board will retain jurisdiction of the case for 1 year from the date of the order (June 14, 1996 through 1997).

ASSESSMENT

An ongoing evaluation of the response is necessary for this project, because all of the drug sales were not completely eliminated. Drug related activities moved into the park and neighboring complexes. As part of the analysis, it was determined that a maintenance plan would be needed due to the complexity of the problem, the inability to isolate the problem, and the number of people affected by the problem.

Our best measure of effectiveness was drawn from citizens' opinions and observations. Members of other departments of the city government noted positive changes. We received numerous calls and letters stating that the plaza was a better place than it used to be. The calls for service indicated a small decline, with no increases noted.

As a result of the hearing, neighboring complexes initiated improvements to their landscaping and property appearance. Crime watch programs were initiated and owners began taking more of an interest in their properties, hoping the drug problems would not flow into their communities.

The outcome of the Nuisance Abatement hearing created an adversarial relationship between the plaza owner and the police department. One of the items stressed by the board was the need for the owner to establish and maintain communication with Officer Mathis. After weeks of no communication, it was apparent that Officer Mathis had to initiate contact the owner and the police department. This communication prompted a letter from the attorney representing the owner of the plaza's attorney requesting that Officer Mathis not have any communication or contact with the owner of the plaza. This request terminated all efforts at cooperation.

A copy of this letter was forwarded to the Nuisance Abatement Board attorney. This was clearly an indication that the plaza owner did not plan to adhere to the board's order. In response to this letter, the board filed for an injunction against the plaza. This injunction would, in essence use the courts authority to enforce the

Nuisance Abatement Board's orders. At the same time, the plaza owner filed an appeal to the board's orders, asserting that the orders were unjustified. As recent as August 20, 1996, hearings were scheduled in circuit court.

Prior to the most recent hearings, the owner had made some of the changes that were requested. The dumpsters were relocated to the rear of the plaza, improving the appearance in the front of the plaza. An additional gate was installed in the breezeway to re-route pedestrian traffic. Street intelligence and business owners told police that the drug sales have been displaced to the adjacent apartment complex and the entrance to the park.

The calls for service to the plaza have decreased since June. We believe that this reduction is caused partly because the business owner does not want to bring attention to the plaza anymore after the of the Nuisance Abatement hearing, and partly because the drugs sales have actually moved to another location. Only three arrests have been made in the plaza between June and July.

This indicates that the problem has been displaced to another location. Narcotics arrests have increased in the area surrounding the plaza. We continue to receive other calls for service to the plaza such as disturbances, police service calls, and suspicious persons.

| Calls for service from June to July 1996 | |
|---|----|
| Disturbances | 40 |
| Juvenile Disturbance | 9 |
| Narcotics | 24 |
| Suspicious Person | 19 |
| Trespassing | 19 |
| Information | 4 |
| Police Service Call | 7 |
| Fight | 6 |
| Narcotics Arrest | 3 |

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The displacement of the problems at Mission Lake Plaza has drawn significant concern for the adjacent apartment complex, Don Carlos Apartments. Don Carlos Apartments is composed of roughly two hundred units mainly occupied by low-income tenants.

The complex has drastically deteriorated in appearance over the past five months. The complex currently has over one hundred code violations. Drug dealers sell drugs from apartments rented by friends or female acquaintances.

There are several areas within the complex that are ideal for selling drugs. Poor lighting, abandoned apartments, and accessibility has made Don Carlos a new location of operations for the drug dealers that frequented Mission Lake Plaza. Efforts are being made to solicit the cooperation of management, and to make sure this complex is not transformed into another open-air drug market.

This project will call for continued monitoring and continued enforcement. Mission Lake Plaza was identified as the nucleus of the problem in this area. However, it does not stand-alone. It affects a wide range of people and locations in the central neighborhood. The efforts towards the plaza are the start of a long-term revitalization plan for the central neighborhood. The changes include appearance, design, and economic development. The positive changes to the plaza have stimulated the positive development of the entire area.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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NOTES

1. The philosophy and practice of the Lauderhill Police Department demands problem-solving efforts from every individual in the department.
2. During the initial stages of forming a new department, Chief Michael Scott incorporated problem solving into the administration and operation of the department, and made it known that this would be a guiding principle of the department.

3. When a police officer is hired, he or she receives training in basic problem skills from trained instructors in a classroom setting. Officers are introduced to the problem solving process. Tracking and monitoring of projects is done by computer program and requires documentation. At the beginning of a new problem-solving project initiated by an officer, he or she enters the project name and pertinent information into the department computer. This information can be accessed by anyone in the department and can be referred to as a guide.
4. Once a week, officers in front of management do a problem solving presentation. This session is designed to give the presenting officer ideas and suggestions on their problem solving efforts.
5. The management encourages brainstorming between officers and their peers.
6. The department has a resource library stocked with problem solving publications and materials from around the country.
7. The department has sent personnel from all levels in the organization to advanced problem solving training and to the national problem oriented policing conference.
8. Incentives and awards are given to officers that engage in problem solving. Officers are allowed to work on their projects during their tour of duty, and are compensated for work done by them off duty. The Chief of Police recognizes good problem solving efforts with his *Excellence in Problem Solving Award*. This award is presented on the basis of recommendations from an officer's supervisor; the Chief then reviews the recommendation.
9. Problem solving skills are not limited to police officers. Civilian personnel in the department are encouraged to apply problem-solving techniques to their positions. The entire Lauderhill Police Department has dedicated itself to providing the community with quality and dedication. Problem solving has propelled the department and the community of Lauderhill into the 21st century by employing and delivering a higher level of police service.